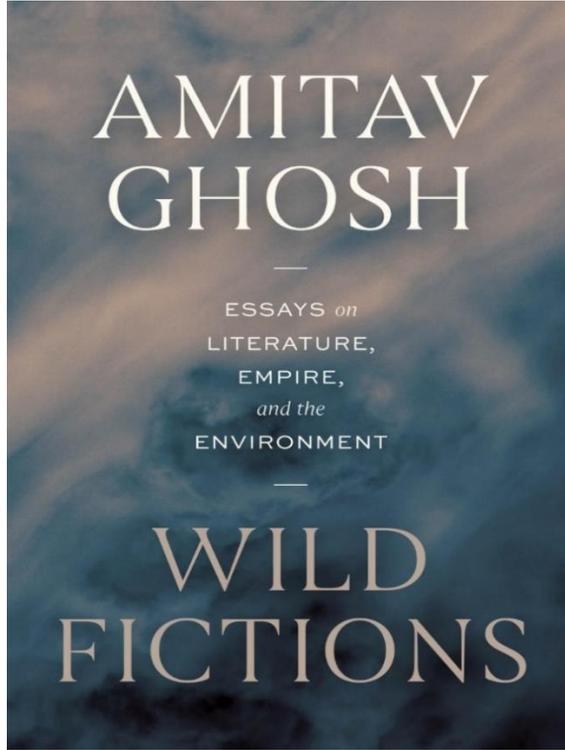


Amitav Ghosh. *Wild Fictions: Essays on Literature, Empire, and the Environment*. Gurugram: Fourth Estate (Harper Collins), 2025, 471 pp. ISBN 978-93-6569-100-9 (Print – Hardback)



It is interesting to note that a collection of nonfictional essays by Amitav Ghosh would be entitled *Wild Fictions*. There is an essay of the same title in the book where the author unpacks the meanings of the titular expression, and this will be discussed soon. For the moment let us look at this collection as an *attempt to understand* or *to tentatively explore* (keeping the etymological meaning of the word *essay* in mind) the many relevant aspects of human life and the times we all live in.

The book is divided into six sections. Each section is provided with a short introductory passage where the author tries to open up the salient points raised in the essays grouped together in that section of the book. In the general introduction to the book, Ghosh talks of a common thread running through the essays on a wide variety of subjects. The twenty-six essays, the author points out are “bearing witness to a rupture in time, ... [and are] chronicling the passing of an era that began 300 years ago” (ix). The effects of industrialisation, colonialism,

conflicts all around can be subsumed in the human attitude of looking at nature as nothing more than a resource that can, shamelessly, be exploited and utilised for the benefits of “a small minority of human beings at the expense of a great majority of the world’s population” (xii).

The book is dedicated to Sukanta Chaudhuri and Supriya Chaudhuri, two world renowned academicians from Kolkata who have been instrumental in inspiring a generation of students and researchers. It is through them, to quote the author himself, “some aspects of Kolkata’s intellectual legacy have survived against all odds” (87). The essays that form part of the book were mostly written and published in the last two decades and were either papers presented at international conferences or symposia or published in world-renowned journals and books. They are, therefore, a distilling of the best intellectual endeavours of one of the most sensitive and erudite minds of the twenty-first century.

The essay “The Great Uprooting: Migration and Displacement in an Age of Planetary Crisis” looks at the issue of migration in the era of the Anthropocene. Reversing the simplistic idea that refugees are mostly from war ravaged countries of the Global South, Ghosh talks of how climate issues along with many other subtle factors have contributed to the movements of population across the globe. Typical images of individuals from Third or Fourth World countries traversing long distances seldom do justice to the complexity of the issue. Contrary to the colonial exercise of repopulating the earth by facilitating the movement of slaves and indentured labourers, the present-day phenomenon is one of confusion as Europe seldom knows the details of the migrants. These are in fact results of “ever-increasing growth and acceleration of the process of production, consumption and circulation” (28). Some other essays in the first section deal with climate catastrophes or the potential of the same. The origin of the term *cyclone* and the history of human folly, be it in the desire of the British to set up a port named after Lord Canning in the Sundarbans or in the proposed tourist complexes in the mangrove land, are dealt with here. These issues have also been considered by Ghosh in his novels *The Hungry Tide* (2004) and *Gun Island* (2019). The focus shifts to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the aftermath of the tsunami of 2004 in the essay “The Town by the Sea.” This is a journey to the land that has been devastated by the furies of Nature. The story of an individual who had lost his wife and daughter as well as his house and belongings is disturbing in its very starkness. From the debris left behind, this scientist does not attempt to salvage even a picture of his lost family. Rather he gathers the slides that he had prepared as part of his research. May be this was one aspect of his existence that nature did not have the power to destroy.

History forms an integral part of the novels of Amitav Ghosh and there are sustained attempts on his part to give voice to silenced or forgotten histories. The title of the essay “Wordless Pasts” (191) perfectly sums up this tendency. The essays in the second section of this book talk about the undocumented role of Indians in wars they fought as part of imperial forces and the mental disconnect with the same. He accesses forgotten texts that try to reverse the prejudice of Bengalis as “not [being] classified as a “martial” race” (91). The section also has an essay on the Lascars who played an important role in the nineteenth century colonial enterprise of the transfer, settlement, and exploitation of indentured labourers. The linguistic aspect of this history and the creation of a pidgin tongue are also analysed.

Travel and exploration form the basis of Amitav Ghosh’s writings and the essays in the third section deal with the widening of mental horizons through travel. His views against fundamentalism are expressed succinctly. He journeys to the remote provinces of China as well as to the Spice Islands of Ternate and Tidore. The spice trade and the colonial exploitation, appropriation of a geographical space and varieties of vegetation along with the environmental aspects of the same are dealt with in the essays and remind us of Ghosh’s book length study *The Nutmeg’s Curse* (2021).

The following section contains the titular essay “Wild Fictions.” The main thrust of the essay is the adjustment between humans and animals as well as the issue of cohabitation in the natural world with “equitable dispensation” (281). Ghosh refers to folk tales that try to bring home the point. The most unfortunate aspect of conservation is that the price is paid, and the consequences borne by the poorest of the poor. Ghosh says that “the idea of an “untouched” forest is none other than a wild fiction” (291). The human inhabitants of the remote forests have also to be taken into consideration when there is any plan of conservation of the wildlife. Tales of Bon Bibi or the farmer who says that he learns from nature along with stories by Mahasweta Devi and others all open up this contentious area of adjustment and cohabitation.

All knowledges develop through debate and discussion and Amitav Ghosh’s conversations with the best minds on issues of contemporary relevance form the fifth section of the book. His long and informed correspondence with historian Dipesh Chakrabarty dwells upon the problematic issue of what constitutes modernity. Dialogues with Shashi Tharoor centre around the issue of progress and the almost deliberate forgetting of the exploitation unleashed by Britain on Colonial India. The title of another essay, “Imperial Denial” talks of how narratives of emancipation and progress deliberately blind us to the climate issues arising out of the same. Engagements with the work of Priya Satia also

have a similar thrust dealing with how progress and ideas around it led to “gestation of this time of monsters” (297). Storytelling and its relationship with history and remembering of the past is also dealt with in another essay.

The final section of *Wild Fictions* contains a mixed group of essays. The first essay in this section takes us back to Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land* (1992) and revisits the issues in his famous “subversive history in guise of a traveller’s tale.” Ghosh also talks of the unhealthy relations between technology and power. He vouches for “the advancement of science [which] would bring about greater social justice” (406). In the final essay on A.K. Ramanujan, Ghosh deals with “context-free and context-sensitive rules” (425) which are essential in a pluralist culture of ours.

In the concluding comments to the book, Amitav Ghosh talks of how the contemporary times can be classified both as “a time of monsters” as well as a “time of benedictions” as it has “become possible to contemplate, and even embrace, potentialities – that were denied or rejected during the age of high modernity” (427). Sounding notes of hope, Ghosh turns to the literary and says that in the present “time of angels, we are slowly beginning to understand that in order to hear the earth, we must first learn to love it” (Ibid.) *Wild Fictions* shows us a new direction and reminds us of how rays of hope can still be seen if only we know how and where to look for them.

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